

Message Text

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ACTION ARA-10

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FM AMEMBASSY BOGOTA

TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 888

C O N F I D E N T I A L BOGOTA 3219

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR, CO

SUBJECT: OUTLOOK FOR PRESIDENT LOPEZ

1. SUMMARY. LAST WEEKS' FLURRY OF RUMORS THAT PRESIDENT LOPEZ HAD RESIGNED AND/OR THAT A MILITARY COUP WAS AFOOT (BOGOTA 2968) WAS SUMPTOMATIC OF DIFFICULTIES THAT WILL CONTINUE TO TROUBLE THE LOPEZ ADMINISTRATION FOR THE FORESEEABLE FUTURE. DESPITE THE SERIOUSNESS OF THESE PROBLEMS AND THIS ADMINISTRATION'S DIM PROSPECTS FOR SUCCESS IN DEALING WITH THEM, WE SEE NO IMMEDIATE THREAT TO THE SURVIVAL OF THE LOPEZ ADMINISTRATION, WHICH WE EXPECT TO ENDURE UNTIL THE INAUGURATION IN AUGUST 1978 OF LOPEZ' LEGALLY ELECTED SUCCESSOR. END SUMMARY.

2. ALLEGATIONS OF IMPRPRITIES INVOLVING TWO OF LOPEZ' SONS, ONE OF THEM HIS PRIVATE SECRETARY, WERE THE IMMEDIATE CAUSE OF THE RECENT RESIGNATION URMORS. THEY WER FURTHER DRAMATIZED BY LOPEZ' OVERREACTION TO PRESS STORIES ON THESE ALLEGATIONS, WHICH TOOK THE FORM OF HARSH PUBLIC CRITICISM BY HIM OF THE PRESS, INCLUDING THE FRIENDLY AND RATHER TAME LIBERAL ESTABLISHMENT PILLAR, EL TIEMPO. HE APPARENTLY PRESSURED THAT LATTER NEWSPAPER TO SILENCE A PERSISTENTLY MORDANT CRITIC, THE WIDELY READ HUMOROUS COLUMNIST KLIM, WHOSE SUBSEQUENT RESIGNATION WAS WIDELY PUBLICIZED AND BESTOWED ON HIM VIRTUAL MARTYR STATUS. SUBSEQUENT PUBLIC

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STATEMENTS BY KLIM, NEVER DENIED, CLAIMED THAT EL TIEMPO PUBLISHER HERNANDO SANTOS, WHO HAD JUST LEFT A MEETING WITH LOPEZ, INVOKED THE IMMINENCE OF A MILITARY COUP IN ORDER TO PERSUADE KLIM TO SUSPEND HIS ATTACKS. NEITHER KLIM NOR MOST OBSERVERS GAVE CREDENCE TO THE ARGUMENT THAT A COUP WAS IN THE OFFING. IN RETROSPECT, AND IN LINE WITH LOPEZ' CHARACTER, IT SEEMS LIKELY THAT HIS REACTION MEY HAVE BEEN A COMBINATION

OF PEEVISHNESS AND ASTIFICE, WITH LOPEZ HEATEDLY SPQAKING
OF RESIGNING, WHILE AWARE THAT THIS WOULD GALVANIZE HIS
SUPPORTERSS AND, FOR THE SAME REASON, POSSIBLY CONJURING UP THE THREA
T
OF A COUP. ADDING PLAUSIBLIITY TO THE RESIGNATION RUMORS WAS
THE PRECEDENT OF THE RESIGNATION FROM THE PRESIDENCY A LITTLE
OVER FORTY YEARS AGO OF LOPEZ' FATHER AMIDST SCANDAL WHICH
INVOLVED HS SON AND PRIVATE SECRETARY, THE PRESENT PRESIDENT.

3. THE RECENT RESIGNATION AND COUP RUMORS WERE NOT THE FIRST
SUCH REPORTS TO SURFAACE DURING THE LOPEZ PRESIDENCY. HOWEVER,
THE CURRENCY AND CREDIBILITY THEY BRIEFLY GAINED WERE A RESULT
NOT ONLY O F LOPEZ' FAMILIAL PROBLEMS AND SURROUNDING CIRCUMSTANCES
BUT ALSO OF A PROGRESSIVE EROSION OF THE POLITICAL SUPPORT
AND PUBLIC CONFIDENCE WHICH LOPEZ ONCE ENJOYED. LOPEZ'
CONDITION AS A LAME DUCK - HE MAY NOT SUCCEED HIMSELF -
IS INCREASINGLY A HANDICAP. THE ONCE NEAR UNANIMOUS ALLEGIANCE
HE RECEIVED FROM THE LIBERAL AND CONSERVATIVE PARTIES, IN
AND OUT OF CONGRESS, HAS BEEN FRACTURED AS BOTH PARTIES
HAVE DIVIDED INTO FACTIONS OVER THE ISSUE OF THEIR PRESIDENTIAL
CANDIDATES FOR 1978; THEIR LOYALTIES ARE NOW PRIMARILY TO
FACTION LEADERS AND PORTENTIAL CANDIDATES, AND ONLY SECONDARILY
TO LOPEZ. IN ADDITION, THE POWERFUL PASTRANA-OSPINA WING OF
THE CONSERVATIVE PARTY HAS FOR SOME TIME ASSUMED AN INCREASINGLY
CRITICAL ROLE TOWARD THE LOPEZ ADMINISTRATION AS A RESULT OF WHICH
THE GOVERNMENT APPEARS TO BE ON THE VERGE OF EXPELLING FROM THE
GOVERNMENT THOSE MEMBERS OF THE FACTION WHO ARE IN OFFICIAL
POSITIONS. LOPEZ IS ALSO SUFFERING A LOSS OF CONFIDENCE AMONG
BROAD SECTORS OF COLOMBIANS BECASUE OF HIS LACK OF SUCCESS SO
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FAR IN RESOLVING COLOMBIA'S MOST PRESSING PROBLEMS, INCLUDING
SOME TO WHICH HE HIMSELF HAD ASSIGNED HIGH PRIORITY. INFLATION
DURING THE FIRST THREE MONTHS THIS YEAR IS RUNNING AT AN
ANNUAL RATE OF ABOUT THIRTY PERCENT, COMPARED WITH THE TWENTY-
FIVE PERCENT RATE DURING THE LAST YEAR OF THE PREVIOUS ADMINIST-
TRATION. THE TAC REFORM, A MAJOR LOPEZ ACCOMPLISHMENT DURING
THE FIRST MONTHS OF HIS ADMINISTRATION, HAS NOT ACHIEVED A
NOTICEABLE IMPROVEMENT IN INCOME DISTRIBUTION. FOR SOME
GROUPS THE INEQUALITIES ARE PROBABLY GREATER NOW THAN AT THE
TIME LOPEZ ASSUMED OFFICE. ANXIETY OVER TERRORISM, ESPECIALLY
KIDNAPPING, AND CRIME CONTINUES HIGH. CONCERN OVER
CORRUPTION IN GOVERNMENT IS GROWING, ACCENTUATED MOST
RECENTLY BY THE ALLEGATIONS REGARDING LOPEZ' SONS.

4. COUP RUMORS REACHED THEIR HIGHEST PEAK DURING THE LOPEZ
ADMINISTRATION IN APRIL-MAY 1975, WHEN THEN ARMY COMMANDER
GENERAL VALENCIA TOVAR WAS FIRED BY PRESIDENT LOPEZ. AT
THAT TIME, COLOMBIANS OF ALL POLITICAL WALKS, INCLUDING
RIGHT WING CONSERVATIVES, VOLUNTEERED TO EMBASSY OFFICERS

THEIR STRONG DISAPPROVAL OF SUCH AN EVENTUATLITY AND EVEN THEIR DETERMINATION TO RESIST IT. NOW, THE EXPRESSED ATTITUDE TOWARD SUCH RUMORS IT MORE LIKELY TO BE ONE OF APATHY.

5. HOWEVER, THE EVENTS OF LAST WEEK, BY DRAMATIZING THE LOPEZ ADMINISTRATION'S RELATIVE ISOLATION, HAVE HAD THE EFFECT OF RALLYING SUPPORT FOR THE GOVERNMENT. THE INFLUENTIAL LIBERAL PRESS HAS REASSUMED ITS GENERALLY SOLICITOUS ATTITUDE TOWARD THE GOVERNMENT AND HAS REFRAINED FROM FURTHER EDITORIALIZING ON LOPEZ' ATTITUDE TOWARD THE PRESS AND ON LOPEZ' SONS. EX-PRESIDENT CARLOS LLERAS ISSUED A STRONG STATEMENT OF SUPPORT FOR LOPEZ, WHICH LLERAS SAID ANY LIBERAL PRESIDENT DESERVED, AND DENIED THAT ANY "PLOT" AGAINST THE GOVERNMENT WAS INVOLVED IN THE PRESS STORIES AND RUMORS. LLERAS STATED, HOWEVER, THAT HE WOULD CONTINUE TO FEEL FREE TO COMMENT CRITICALLY ON THOSE GOVERNMENT ACTIONS WITH WHICH HE WAS NOT IN AGREEMENT.
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6. WHILE MUCH OF THE BASIS OF LOPEZ' SUPPORT HAS DIMINSHED OR IS SHAKEY, WHEN THE NEED ARISES, AS IT SEEMED TO LAST WEEK, HE CAN RALLY SUFFICIENT SUPPORT FOR HIMSELF TO STRENGTHEN HIS POSITION. THIS IS PROBABLY LARGELY A RESULT OF THE ATTACHEMENT MOST COLOMBIANS CONTINUE TO FEEL TOWARD THE COUNTRY'S DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS, AND A DESIRE TO AVOID ADVENTURES, RATHER THAN OF ENTHUSIASM FOR LOPEZ. ALSO, THERE IS AT PRESENT, AS FAR AS WE ARE AWARE, NO DESIRE OR INTENTION ON THE PART OF ANY SIGNIFICANT CIVILIAN OR MILITARY GROUP TO ATTEMPT ANY EXTRACONSTITUTIONAL CHANGE OF THE ESTABLISHED ORDER. DESPITE LOPEZ' PROBLEMS, WE EXPECT HIS GOVERNMENT TO SURVIVE ITS PERIOD IN OFFICE.
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